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ABSTRACT

This digest deals with bibliotherapy, the practice of healing through books. The digest discusses whether bibliotherapy works, when it should be used, who should conduct it, and how it should be used. The digest concludes with five guidelines for conducting bibliotherapy. (RS)

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Bibliotherapy

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by Nola Kortner Aiex

What is Bibliotherapy?

Simply stated, bibliotherapy can be defined as the use of books to help people solve problems. Another, more precise definition is that bibliotherapy is a family of technique for structuring interaction between a facilitator and a participant based on mutual sharing of literature (Pardeck, 1989).

The idea of healing through books is not a new one—it can be traced far back in history, from the days of the first libraries in Greece (Bibliotherapy, 1982). The use of books in healing, however, has been interpreted differently by classical scholars, physicians, psychologists, social workers, nurses, parents, teachers, librarians, and counselors. There is, in fact, confusion in determining the dividing line between reading guidance and bibliotherapy (Smith, 1989). And the vast amount of professional literature that is available on bibliotherapy (Eppel, 1989) naturally mirrors the point of view of the helping professional who wrote it and the field in which he or she is an expert.

Does It Work?

Riordan and Wilson (1989), in a review of the literature of the effects of bibliotherapy, found that a majority of the studies show mixed results for the efficacy of bibliotherapy as a separate treatment for the solving of problems. They concluded that bibliotherapy generally appears to be more successful as an adjunctive therapy. Despite such mixed research results, however, interest in the use of bibliotherapy appears to have increased in the past few years. This most likely reflects the increase of societal and familial problems in the United States—rise in divorce, alienation of young people, excessive peer group pressure, alcohol and drug abuse, and so on. Educators have also begun to recognize the increasingly critical need for delivering literacy instruction to at-risk and homeless children and their families (Ouzts, 1991).

In addition, researchers Riordan and Wilson concluded that the explosion of self-help programs during the past decade has contributed to the rise in the use of bibliotherapy, in the form of popular self-help books, such as

"What Color Is Your Parachute" and "The Relaxation Response." Books such as these are the prescriptive choice of most mental health professionals for their clients, rather than fiction or poetry, according to the two researchers. Is self-help (even directed self-help) really bibliotherapy? This popular practice underscores the confusion about defining the actual technique of bibliotherapy mentioned at the beginning of this digest.

When Should Bibliotherapy Be Used?

Bibliotherapeutic intervention may be undertaken for many reasons: (1) to develop an individual's self-concept; (2) to increase an individual's understanding of human behavior or motivations; (3) to foster an individual's honest self-appraisal; (4) to provide a way for a person to find interests outside of self; (5) to relieve emotional or mental pressure; (6) to show an individual that he or she is not the first or only person to encounter such a problem; (7) to show an individual that there is more than one solution to a problem; (8) to help a person discuss a problem more freely; and (9) to help an individual plan a constructive course of action to solve a problem.

Before undertaking bibliotherapy, however, a practitioner must remember that it is more than just the casual recommendation of a certain book to an individual—it is a deliberate course of action that requires careful planning (Bibliotherapy, 1982).

Who Should Conduct Bibliotherapy?

Whether you are a classroom teacher, a librarian, or a mental health professional, be advised that bibliotherapy must be handled with great delicacy, and not every practitioner possesses the personal qualifications to be a facilitator in the process. Those who are interested, however, should possess personal stability; a genuine interest in working with others; and the ability to empathize with others without moralizing, threatening, or commanding (Bibliotherapy, 1982).

In addition, Smith (1989) recommends working with another practitioner or authority in a different field. For example, if you are a language arts teacher, you might collaborate with the school librarian, a guidance counselor,

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or the school psychologist. This cooperation helps in balancing the process so that no one person is "in charge." Smith also feels that facilitators need to have a light-enough tone in discussing problems so that no one becomes upset, but a thoughtful-enough manner to allow for "comfortable discussion." She also feels that fictional works are best for discussion purposes because participants can talk about the characters in a book rather than about themselves (Smith, 1989).

All parties must agree to the bibliotherapy, however. A recent study on generating reading interest in adolescents with handicaps (Klemens, 1993) found that the majority were not even interested in reading novels with handicapped characters. Most of the young people in the survey "seemed to view the term 'handicapped' in a very narrow sense and reject the word and anything to which it may be connected."

How Should It Be Used?

Arleen Hynes's book, "Bibliotherapy Handbook," is considered a good all-around introduction to bibliotherapy. It defines the types of bibliotherapy and details what the practitioner needs to know, including basic information on how to become a bibliotherapist (Smith, 1989).

Above all, books chosen by the practitioner should have literary merit—a poorly written novel with stereotyped characters and simplistic answers to complex questions is probably worse than not reading anything at all and can even leave children or young people with a negative view of literature. Reading quality literature, however, can be beneficial to students, even outside the context of bibliotherapy (White, 1989). A classroom teacher who really loves literature and who has a large collection of books is in a good position to conduct bibliotherapy, if he or she possesses the other necessary personal qualifications.

A practitioner must also decide whether an individual or a group therapy approach would be best in the particular situation. Individual therapy requires time-consuming one-on-one sessions, but some people feel freer to express themselves in a one-on-one situation.

For a classroom teacher, of course, the classroom could be seen as a natural group, and it would be a group easily broken up into collaborative units. According to Pardeck and Pardeck (1990), groups can be a powerful vehicle for helping to heal emotional problems. The Pardecks believe that a group approach to learning enhances the total child. The group approach allows members to share common experiences, thus lessening anxieties. It can create a feeling of belonging and can also provide security for individuals who might feel uncomfortable in situations where they are singled out for special attention. Working in a group may lead an individual to develop a different perspective and a new understanding of the problems of others (Bibliotherapy, 1982).

Guidelines

Regardless of whether the practitioner chooses the individual or group approach, the basic procedures in conducting bibliotherapy are: (1) motivate the individual or

individuals with introductory activities; (2) provide time for reading the material; (3) allow incubation time; (4) provide follow-up discussion time, using questions that will lead persons from literal recall of information through interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of that information; and (5) conduct evaluation and direct the individual or individuals toward closure—this involves both evaluation by the practitioner and self-evaluation by the individual (Bibliotherapy, 1982).

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